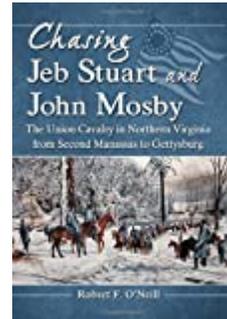




**Robert F. O'Neill.** *Chasing Jeb Stuart and John Mosby: The Union Cavalry in Northern Virginia from Second Manassas to Gettysburg.* Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2012. xi + 316 pp. \$45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7085-3.



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## On Mosby's and Stuart's Heels: Union Cavalry Organization and Operations from Second Manassas to Gettysburg

In the early 1960s, David Herbert Donald proclaimed that Civil War history was dead, but the sheer number of books published annually on the war suggests otherwise. Despite this collective erudition, historians have written relatively little on cavalry operations during the war. In particular, few have assumed an operational or tactical perspective. Robert O'Neill's *Chasing Jeb Stuart and John Mosby: The Union Cavalry in Northern Virginia from Second Manassas to Gettysburg* helps to fill this void by focusing most specifically on the cavalry brigades attached to the Defenses of Washington following the Union defeat at Second Manassas through to the summer of 1863 (pp. 4-5). This period includes the reorganization of the Union Cavalry Corps; the emergence of George Custer, Elon Farnsworth, and Wesley Merritt; and the federal attempt to counter John Mosby's brand of guerilla warfare in Northern Virginia for almost six months before the fight at Gettysburg (pp. 4-5, 254). In addition to highlighting the formation and action of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade, especially before

George A. Custer's appointment to command, O'Neill chronicles oft-overlooked actions, including J. E. B. Stuart's 1862 Christmas Raid and the important role played by the Union cavalry commander Major General Julius Stahel. O'Neill's focus, then, is a micro-history of Union and Confederate cavalry operations in northern Virginia. O'Neill is especially intent on maintaining that the organization and tactics of Union cavalry commanders, such as Stahel, should be recognized for their ability to match the fighting effectiveness and élan of Confederate commanders, such as Mosby and Stuart. For this reason, he argues, Stahel and his officers should be saved from history's dusty attic (p. 5).

Due to the micro-historical approach and the narrow focus of the study, O'Neill's book will be appreciated most by readers interested in cavalry operations in the eastern theater of the Civil War, and by scholars who focus on larger campaigns, such as the one leading up to Gettysburg. O'Neill's book likely will be of use to aspiring battlefield guides, especially those at Antietam or

Gettysburg. While Civil War aficionados will find this study useful, this book, unfortunately, is not for the general public. Readers who lack a basic understanding of the American Civil War or of cavalry tactics will likely meet with more frustration than understanding. Further, while O'Neill does include the actions of Stuart in the work, the book largely focuses on Mosby.

O'Neill should be commended for his extensive archival research as the primary documentation is at the root of the work and its greatest strength. Plaudits aside, the study is hardly without problems. The most salient shortcoming of the book is its organization. Because O'Neill chooses a chronological organization and focuses on daily and weekly actions from September 1862 to July 1863, the flow of the book is as awkward as it is tedious. That is to say, the entire book reads more like a collection of short vignettes from the dispatches and primary accounts that O'Neill has researched rather than an organized, engaging narrative. For example, between chapter 1, which details cavalry operations from September to November, and chapter 3, which follows cavalry operations in the first three weeks of December, O'Neill inserts a chapter providing a quasi-history of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade. While the introduction of the

Michigan troopers is interesting, the placement of the chapter is problematic as it inhibits the flow of the book.

O'Neill's work also suffers from an absence of maps. Because so many of the important actions that he details are very small in scope and scale, unless one has a thorough understanding of the geography of northern Virginia in the early 1860s, the significance of the fights is often lost. The addition of many more maps would have strengthened the book and better mirrored the admirable energy and effort O'Neill has shown in mining for primary, archival sources, which, as stated, remains the strength of the work.

Problems with organization, flow, and a relative dearth of maps aside, O'Neill's work does add to the historiography in a fairly meaningful way. In fact, the book complements well studies conducted by Eric Wittenberg, *Union Cavalry Comes of Age: Hartwood Church to Brandy Station, 1863* (2006), Robert Trout, *After Gettysburg: Cavalry Operations in the Eastern Theater* (2012), and William Connery, *Mosby's Raids in Civil War Northern Virginia* (2013). It is a fine addition for anyone interested in cavalry operations during the American Civil War, especially in the eastern theater.

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